



**June 19, 2016**

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**God Speaks Through Other People and Events – Mt 13:10-17**

Jesus is, himself, proof that God speaks through people. And he pointed to events as God's tools for getting his message across. Here, he tells his disciples (and us) that hearing God's speech isn't easy.

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Jesus tells us that understanding comes through faith. There are many ways of perceiving what is happening around us, but for the faithful, God also speaks through the circumstances and people in our lives.

That thought is a very important tool for reflecting on the people and events around us. Jesus – quoting Isaiah – reminds us that we can listen and look and not see or hear – but in faith, God makes it possible to do both.

The point we're emphasizing in this series is simple: God speaks. Not just long ago to people far away, but to you, and today. What the world needs badly right now is to hear God's speech.

Don't you want to hear from God? And God, being God, uses an awful lot of ways to communicate with us. Remember God speaking to Moses in the burning bush?

Something like that would be great, wouldn't it? It would certainly clarify things. But putting that sort of expectation on God's speech is part of the problem. Too often we expect messages from God to be, well, messages from God. Holy skywriting.

That happens, sometimes – but there is so much more for us to hear – comfort, guidance, affirmation, reminders, love. Mostly, God speaks in subtleties. We still need to hear what's said. And Jesus tells the disciples we can do this.

Have you ever skipped a button on your shirt or blouse and not realized it until the end of the day, and asked yourself, "Why didn't *somebody* say something?" Well, perhaps God *is* speaking. We need to hear it. We need to pay attention, to listen. To learn.

God speaks to us every day. A child's smile. A lick from a puppy. A kindness in the checkout line at the store. God tries to get our attention every day. It's so easy to just keep on the way we're already headed. Much of our lives are filled with ordinary events that don't seem on the surface to be filled with God, though they are. It takes reflection to remember that we're not alone.

For me, in my best moments, I turn to God and realize he is walking the road with me. God is like a gentle, caring friend who walks us through each day, and like gentle friends' words, sometimes God's loving words just slip in one ear and out the other. We have to practice being sensitive and in tune.

At my very first church, which was on a downtown corner – the other three corners were occupied by a gas station, the Greyhound Bus station, and the county courthouse – one rainy day as I walked to my car I saw a disheveled, perhaps homeless woman slip and fall in the street. Back then I wore a clerical collar, so it was obvious I was clergy, but as I tried to help her to her feet, she scratched me and told me off.

What message was there in that?

Well, one could be, “Don't try to help homeless people! It only leads to trouble!”

But on reflection, there were many messages. Not everyone wants help. Embarrassment is a powerful force no matter your circumstance. Everyone has some dignity. That's just for starters. There was more to the encounter than just the obvious – I think God likes to layer things.

For example, one of the worst-kept secrets of Stephen Ministry is that time after time, it's the person being cared for whom God uses to speak and bless the Stephen Minister. That's true for all the ways we serve others – God speaks to us through them.

Every event, every encounter brings with it the potential for a message from God. God gives us opportunities to learn every day – far more than we can process, with even the most sensitive powers of observation. Look up at the sky during the day, and remember that there are stars there – it’s just that the brilliance of the sun overpowers their light.

Perhaps it’s the screaming noise of our problems, our own self-involvement, which prevents our hearing the subtle tones of God’s voice.

But let’s say you’ve calmed down, as the psalm says “quieted your soul like a weaned child.” You feel that God is speaking to you. You need to hear that message correctly. This is the part where things get sticky. How do you know that it’s God you’re hearing?

There’s an old story about a guy looking for guidance who decided to open his Bible, close his eyes, put his finger on the page, and do what he read. The passage was: “And Judas went and hanged himself.”

A bit confused, he tried again. This time he got “Go thou and do likewise.” Hm.

There are ways of seeking God’s guidance, but there are pitfalls along the way. Many people have gotten seriously chewed up because they were certain of a message that wasn’t real.

God, who spoke directly to people (and us) through prophets and Jesus, will tell us things consistent with Jesus' message – which may not be the way we're feeling at any given moment!

1 John 4:1 - "Don't believe everything you hear just because someone says it is a message from God; test it first to see if it really is!" Let me add, be cautious about what you *think* you've heard, too. So, how can you check your findings?

The first step is to square what you think you're hearing with Jesus – it may be worn and parodied, but "What would Jesus do?" is a good question to ask, and it's easy to remember.

The second is to test what you've heard by sharing it with another. God speaks to us through people in direct ways, too – and that's where people whom you trust, who you can talk with, are so important. You know who that is for you, and your pastors are always ready to listen. It's abundantly clear that others often can see in us what we can't see in ourselves. Remember that missed button?

Third: Is this message in isolation? Just for you? Or does it include your relationships with others? God is the God of all – be suspicious of any urging that involves only you. Brian Moll puts it this way: "[Am I turning] the narrative of 'God and us' into a story about 'me'?"

There's an old tradition – going back to Old Testament times – for seek God's guidance: you ask someone wise. “A word, please?” That's the prayer of every preacher!

But, as I hope you see, there are many less formal ways of receiving a word, hearing God speak to us through another person or event. It takes some attention, and sadly far too much of it is missed or ignored.

Sometimes that word comes from the place you'd least expect it. A recovering addict and alcoholic – I'll call her Sue – in her story paints a picture of abuse and misery from childhood. Her father was not the father we idealize on Fathers' Day; he was horrible, beat and abused her, and she ran away to the streets as soon as she could.

That life wasn't much better until she finally was able to face her addictions and seek help. She got a mentor and did exactly what she was told because Sue wanted the peace and sobriety her mentor said God gave her. That's one way Sue listened for God – through the voice of her mentor.

Then, one day, she learned that her father was dying in a hospital in the city where she lived. “Finally,” she told her mentor, “he's getting what he deserves!”

What her mentor told Sue was, “Go and take care of him.” Which she did, despite the fact that he hadn’t changed, was a horrible, angry, mean man who didn’t want her care. She did it anyway.

Then, one night very near the end, she was getting ready to leave after he’d fallen asleep, leaned over and kissed him on the forehead and said, “I love you, Dad.”

She didn’t stop running until she got to her car. It was at that moment that she realized her hatred for him was gone, that he was just a pathetic, dying man, and that God – who is love – had taken away her anger, given her peace, and spoken to - and through - her.

Remember this: in these times and in this world where there is so much noise, there are so many things clamoring for our attention, shouting “Do this! It will change your life, make you better, richer, special!”, God is quietly speaking in all the crowds and chaos around us a truth which is far different: listen, and I will teach you love and give you peace, because you are mine and I love you.